

## Asklepios: The Greek God

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An understanding of this Greek god requires some knowledge of the city that makes him important to Bible students. The name of that Greek city is Pergamos. Its Latinized form is Pergum. The city of Pergamos was not as prominent in Apostolic times as was the city of Ephesus. The city of Pergamos has significance to pupils of the New Testament. It was the third church addressed by John in his message to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2:12-17).

The religion of Jesus Christ, in all probability, came to Pergamos due to the labors of Paul when he worked in Ephesus and was "disputing daily in the school of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9). "And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

Based on modern geography, Pergamos would be located in Turkey. The modern town of Bergama is built among the ruins of this ancient metropolis, but it is far smaller in extent.

### Religious Mecca

As a religious Mecca, Pergamos was styled "Thrice Neokoros." This signified the city had three temples in which the Roman emperors were worshiped as gods. One of the oddest titles to which any city in ancient days could lay claim was the title "Neokoros." "Neokoros" means temple sweeper. When a city

erected a temple to a god, its greatest claim to honor was that it was that it became officially the "Neokoros," the temple sweeper of that god. The sweeper of the temple, of course, was the most menial and humble of religious duties. Behind the title "Neokoros," there lies an idea which in itself is a lovely idea. The idea was that a city's greatest privilege was to render even the humblest service to the god who had taken up his residence within it. Since the city of Pergamos called itself "Thrice Neokoros," here was a city where Caesar was worshiped in three temples. This city, therefore, was dedicated to glorying in the worship of the Roman emperor. Her worship stood out! Three temples in which to worship a man as a god! John, the writer of The Revelation, says Pergamos is the place "where Satan's seat is" and "where Satan dwelleth" (Rev. 2:13). That may have specific reference to the temples dedicated to the Empirical Cult, the worship of Roman emperors as gods. Other gods, however, were worshiped in the city of Pergamos. They were notably Zeus, Dionysus, Athena and Asklepios.

### **Who Was Asklepios?**

Pergamum was the center of the worship of Asklepios, or as the Romans called him, Aesculapius. The Egyptians deified an historical physician, Imhotep, exactly as the Greeks deified the historical Asklepios, i.e., Aesculapius. In 420 B.C., the worship of Asklepios was introduced at Athens coupled with that of Hygieia (in Greek mythology, the goddess of health). Asklepios was the name of the Greek god of medicine, the son of Apollo and the nymph Coronis.

Without going into Greek mythology as to his origin and his acceptance by the Greeks, let us say that temples were erected to Asklepios in many parts of Greece. To the Asklepeion of Asklepios, there came sufferers from all over the ancient world. The temple had its medical wards, its medical schools, its priests, and its votaries. Asklepeions were near healing springs or on high mountains.

The practice of sleeping in these sanctuaries was very common. The emblem of Asklepios is the serpent. The serpent was intimately connected with one of the ways in which cures were effected in the Asklepeion. Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple, there were temple snakes. In the night, the sufferer might be touched by one of these tame and harmless snakes as they glided over the ground on which he lay. The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself, and the touch was held to bring health and healing. It was supposed that this Greek god Asklepios effected cures or prescribed remedies to the sick in dreams. There was a temple of Asklepios at Athens, as there was at Pergamos.

The Greek god Asklepios was introduced into Rome by order of the Sibylline books (293B.C.) in order to avert a pestilence. The Latin form of the Greek god (Asklepios is Aesculapius. Having been introduced into Rome, Asklepios, the Greek god of medicine, became well known in Pergamos and was sometimes referred to as "the Pergamene god." Pergamos has been described as the " Lourdes of the ancient world."

The precincts of Asklepios' temple in Pergamos were dedicated to the sick and afflicted. People came from all parts of the Graeco-Roman world to get both magical and medical aid from priests as well as the god Asklepios.

Is there anything in the worship of Asklepios which might account for the fact that John said Pergamos was the place where Satan's seat was (Rev. 2:13)? There are two possibilities. The characterization of

Asklepios was "Asklepios Soter," "Asklepios the Savior." "Soter," "Savior," is the word which in the belief of any Christian belongs uniquely and exclusively to Jesus Christ. It might well be that the Christians felt that the application of this title to a heathen god was indeed a Satanic perversion of the truth. There was something even more suggestive than that about the worship of Asklepios. Since the emblem of Asklepios was the serpent, many Jews and many Christians with knowledge of the Old Testament believed the serpent was nothing less than the emblem of Satan himself. The serpent was bound to carry the thoughts of these individuals back to the old story of man's first sin in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). Therefore, this might well be why John regarded Pergamos as "Satan's seat." Pergamos had the temple of a god whose emblem was the serpent, and in that temple, snakes crawled about and were regarded as incarnations of the god himself.

### **Final Word**

Asklepios was in the form of a snake and is commonly represented as standing. He is dressed in a long cloak with bare breasts. His usual attribute is a club-like staff with a serpent coiled around it. Have you ever looked at the symbol of the American Medical Association? Its symbol is called a caduceus. In classical mythology, the caduceus was a staff or wand around which two serpents were entwined in opposite directions with their heads facing each other and surmounted by two wings. The caduceus came to be a symbol for Aesculapies, the god of medicine and subsequently for the medical profession itself. The United States Army Medical Corps uses a caduceus on its insignia.

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